ARTS DISTRICT
DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

BY GREG RUBEN
SCI-Arc, or the Southern California Institute of Architecture, is an architecture school located in the heart of the Arts District. Since moving to the neighborhood in 2000 from Playa Vista, SCI-Arc has become instrumental in shaping the culture of the Arts District. Many students live in lofts, which are plentiful in the area. The school is undoubtedly responsible, at least partially, for the recent gentrification of the Arts District. It has brought with it a legitimacy that has transformed the Arts District from a bohemian artists’ colony to one of the hippest areas of Los Angeles.

SCI-Arc is located in the Santa Fe Freight Depot building. Designed by Harrison Albright, the Santa Fe Freight Depot was built in 1907 as a central freight depot for the then burgeoning Santa Fe Coast railroad lines. It is 1,250 feet long - a distance that exceeds the height of the Empire State Building. When SCI-Arc took over the building in 2000, it was essentially one long room covered in graffiti. It was added to the Register of Historic Places in 2006.

The recombinant building is a lesson in engineering and architecture. Thirty thousand square feet of studios and seminar spaces, a workshop, a thesis pit and a bridge to the library have been stacked, cantilevered and suspended to form an open-ended, permissive, flexible space. It seems that anything can happen within these walls. Enter a studio through its doorway (which has no door), and you are standing on what is more like a stage, looking out through a proscenium framed by new steel posts and girders set parallel to and in tandem with the old concrete columns and beams.

-Greg Goldin, LA Weekly
The Arts District was originally a fairly nondescript industrial area of Downtown Los Angeles. Located along the western banks of the Los Angeles River, the area was far enough east that it wasn’t inhabited by many people. Instead, it was used for industry - like Vernon today. The most famous landmark from this era is the Santa Fe Freight Depot, which today houses SCI-Arc.

As modes of transportation shifted around the time of World War II, the area was abandoned. Industry moved elsewhere, leaving vacant industrial buildings. In the late 1970s, artists began to buy and rent out space in these buildings, repurposing them as work/live lofts. Noticing the trend, in 1981 the City of Los Angeles passed the Artist-In-Residence ordinance which legalized residential use of industrial buildings, and in turn, solidifying the district’s reputation as a place for artists.
COMMERCIAL CULTURE
Gentrification has brought more than higher rent to the lofts of the Arts District. It has also transformed the commercial part of the area. Centered around Traction Ave., this part of the Arts District is now home to a number of highly regarded restaurants and cafes.

Here are some of those restaurants and sample reviews from Yelp.com.

- **Wurstküche** 800 E. 3rd St.  
  The place has really cool atmosphere in a really funky, cool, and art-oriented part of town (the arts district!) and really has its own style.

- **Novel Cafe** 811 Traction Ave.  
  Decent coffeehouse with monthly arts displays in Los Angeles’ Arts District? This place is every hipster’s wet dream.

- **Urth Cafe** 451 S. Hewitt St.  
  Urth Cafe has a great tranquil atmosphere which allows you to really enjoy yourself… it can get crowded at times, due to its popularity.

- **R23** 923 E. 2nd St.  
  It’s located in an alley with an abandoned railroad track, next to a boarded-up warehouse coated in graffiti.

- **Blue Dahlia Cafe** 738 E. 3rd St.  
  I like this place =) I feel really chic inside. Plus the paninis aren’t bad.

- **Cafe Metropol** 923 E. 3rd St.  
  This place was great from all ins-and-outs. The ambiance was beautiful, and the live jazz tipped off the night.
CREATIVE CULTURE

Graffiti and other forms of “street art” are ubiquitous in the Arts District. I was told by a resident of the area that the city had legalized graffiti there, which would make sense. It’s all over the core commercial area of Traction Ave. The businesses that are covered in the art, like Pearce’s Garage, wear it like a badge of honor, not trying to remove it but making sure it stays in pristine condition. Other businesses, like Crazy Gideon’s Electronics, have commissioned graffiti writers to paint the business’ name on their building.

Artists whose work can be found in the area include Mr. Cartoon, Relic, Kryst, Man-One, Dethkills, and Shepard Fairey.
THE NEIGHBORHOOD
My impression of the Arts District after spending a day there is a positive one. It has a real sense of community. Because of its small size, the residents of the Arts District get around the neighborhood more on foot and bike than by car. In this sense, it’s an anomaly; a small, pleasantly walkable neighborhood in the heart of Los Angeles, a city notorious for its residents’ dependence on automobiles.

The Arts District, like many other gentrified areas of Los Angeles, has a relaxed atmosphere. No one seems to be in much of a hurry. During the day, people sit around drinking coffee and chatting at Urth Cafe, or having a beer at Wurstkuche. The outside observer gets the impression that everyone knows each other. One of the residents I spoke to talked about Wurstkuche like it was his hangout. It reminded me of the Happy Days gang and Arnold’s Drive-In.

The conflicting nature of gentrification is here in full force. On one hand, gentrification kicks out decent, hard-working residents who can’t afford to live in an expensive area. On the other hand, it tends to make neighborhoods, well, nicer. It’s no surprise that the Arts District’s rent rates are as high as ever.